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# A Partnership Plan to Support High-Quality Instruction in Ohio's Urban School Districts

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# Academic Leadership Journal

Establishing work practices that allow for effective communication, collaboration, and negotiations between state departments of education (DOEs) and their large urban districts is a significant undertaking in the national reform effort. The Ohio Department of Education (ODE) has had a unique opportunity to investigate how to establish an effective framework to build the necessary relationships between large urban districts and the supervising state educational agency (SEA) through funds provided by a Wallace Foundation grant and Harvard University's leadership facilitation. The Wallace funding and partnership with Harvard provided four of Ohio's largest urban school districts with the resources and expertise to reflect and investigate how to best negotiate a productive relationship between these elements in a system dedicated to shared work and a common mission.

This type of collaboration is far more difficult than seems necessary. Too often local and state agencies compete, find themselves in adversarial conflicts over mandates and sanctions, and disagree about the best ways to exercise local control in public education in an ever changing climate where the Federal government is increasingly involved in local educational agency (LEA) practices and decisions.

Most educators are familiar with the compliance regulations that frame the responsibilities, roles, and functions between the public schools, the state DOE, and the Federal government. The first language surveys, free and reduced lunch applications, reporting of prior educational experiences in "cum" files, special education reports (IEPs or 504s), grant applications and funding of special projects, testing data, and subgroup disaggregation of data are all tasks that overlap local, state, and federal agencies.

There are common and major responsibilities that all state DOEs share: distribution and monitoring of funds, program evaluation, developing high stakes tests, and accompanying protocols to test student mastery of specific standards and issuing, establishing, and monitoring licensure requirements for a variety of educational functions. The state has a contract to provide the compliance and monitoring of the state's educational delivery system against federal guidelines and public law (educational code) in order to collect the resources to operate public schools. Often this contract becomes adversarial, with state DOEs requiring urban school districts to submit proof of compliance to a specific set of state or federal regulations, causing tension and distrust between the state DOE and its school districts.

The reauthorization of Title I in 1994 and the legislation enacted through No Child Left Behind 2001 (NCLB) added more tension to the relationship between state DOEs and urban school districts by demanding that districts provide evidence that federal dollars spent produced academic (NCLB) achievement outcomes for students. No longer was mere access to education opportunities adequate; now schools must show how all youth are being supported to meet equal outcomes. NCLB increased the state DOE'S role as a compliance officer. This was especially true in urban school districts where initially the edicts of NCLB had a disproportionate affect on school district and individual school academic rankings. In Ohio, an organization called the Ohio Urban 8 evolved with the intent of addressing misconceptions and easing some of the tensions between ODE and its urban school districts.

Against this backdrop, ODE was awarded a leadership development grant from the Wallace Foundation. The grant required ODE and four urban school districts in the state to commit to a three year leadership training initiative. Harvard University was selected to provide the training. Both ODE and the urban partnership districts were required to identify no more than eight persons representing internal and external school district stakeholders. In the case of school districts, superintendents and union presidents were required to attend. The state superintendent was also required to attend as a member of the SEA team. This created an Ohio community of learners representing large urban districts and their primary supervisors.

The focus of the leadership initiative was the promotion, scaling, and sustaining of high-quality instructional practices in urban districts; the agreed upon objective was improving student achievement. The urban partnership school districts, ODE, and the Harvard trainers all acknowledged the existence of high-quality instruction present in these districts. However, they did identify a need to build consensus and definition as to pedagogy, practice, and strategies for instructional efficacy and developing high-quality instruction.

It is important to make the distinction between highly-qualified teachers in the narrow context of licensure requirements versus high-quality teaching as an essential practice that is evidenced-based, observable (Elmore 2008), and involves collaboration, consensus and expanded leadership. Expanded leadership refers to a set of essential practices that must be implemented at all stakeholder levels and requires establishing a structure for putting the essential practices in place (Elmore 2008). The base premise that supported the training involved the necessity of studying and applying an inclusive and expansive view of leadership within the context of developing strategies and initiatives designed to support high-quality instruction.

At the start of the training the ODE leadership team and each urban district leadership team developed a **theory of action** specifically linked to the mission of the school district or agency and the scope of the work. The theory of action was a challenge because it needed to be broad enough to support the tasks and strategies associated with the plan, but specific enough to maintain a manageable and articulated focus. The ODE leadership team's theory of action was as follows (see ODE Partnership Plan.doc):

*In the context of a new global economy, it is urgent that we collaborate to assure that all of our children will be prepared for success in life. If the state team and urban school districts jointly facilitate and strengthen instructional leadership, then our collective work will accelerate academic achievement.*

The theory of action provided the ODE team with a benchmark to gage the process and content of the work. The theory of change that accompanied the theory of action required that we, as a collaborative team, map the resources, objectives and practices to ensure potential for replication.

Early into the training it became clear that a commitment to examine the most efficient and effective practices to support instruction in urban school districts would involve both ODE and its urban partnership school districts engaging in a self-study of their operational structure(s). For ODE, the self-study involved how to best organize ODE to support urban school districts in their efforts to scale and sustain high-quality instruction as the major strategy to improve student achievement.

## ODE Self Study

The ODE team began the self-study process by examining its practices and interactions with urban school districts; particularly in the area of compliance with a plethora of state and federal edicts. These contentious issues around compliance with Federal edicts sometimes challenged both ODE and urban school district attempts to build and sustain a trusting and collaborative relationship. Another challenge involved the changing and shifting requirements regarding test scores and subsequent rankings on state-mandated high stakes achievement tests.

Knowing that the federal compliance mandates were not negotiable, ODE and the urban school district partners committed to examine their communication structures that served as the foundation for meeting the mandates and reducing the adversarial posturing that was getting in the way of being productive. With this in mind, they developed a relational covenant where all entities agreed to work collaboratively to support high-quality teaching and improved student achievement. The major actions of the covenant involved (see ODE Covenant for Partnership.doc):

- 1.) Jointly gaining consensus on what high-quality teaching and learning looks like in application;
- 2.) Identifying the resources and structures that are necessary to support and sustain high-quality teaching and learning as part of the practice of teaching;
- 3.) Bringing to scale these practices and applications through partnership and research; and
- 4.) Strengthening the relationship between ODE and its urban partnership school districts by developing and sustaining initiatives that support and promote trust between the above referenced entities.

As part of the leadership training process the ODE team reviewed past and current feedback from its urban partnership districts with regard to issues and actions that might potentially compromise a trusting and collaborative relationship. The members of the ODE team discussed the elements within the organizational structure that would *support* partnership and trust and the elements that would *compromise* partnership and trust.

## Findings of Self Study

The data indicated that in order to improve and sustain partnership and collaboration between ODE and its urban partnership districts there was a need to develop a partnership plan that had improved communication between all stakeholders at all levels of interaction and decision-making. The Ohio Department of Education used the self study process to review its operational structures related to communication with urban districts. Feedback was garnered from surveys, interviews and focus groups from ODE's urban partnership districts, and from ODE team members (especially external team members). The state investigation determined the following actions could be honed and retooled to ensure effective systems supporting public education with an increasing global purview:

- 1.) Establish and maintain procedures and practices that would lead to timely updates from ODE to its urban school districts on issues that were having a particular impact on these urban districts in the areas of finance, teaching and learning, and facilities. This also included updates on staffing and

organizational changes at ODE.

- 2.) Define a method for determining in advance whether or not specific compliance edicts, including legislative issues, would likely have an impact on current initiatives that were in operation or planned in the urban school districts.
- 3.) Hone necessary procedures to discuss and evaluate grant opportunities for urban partnership districts in advance of such opportunities being offered to these districts. (These grant opportunities often came to urban school districts with short timelines and challenging requirements.)
- 4.) Develop a technical assistance corps and identify the necessary resource contacts to ensure that when urban school districts need clarification about issues of funding, compliance, or student support they have ready access to guidance.
- 5.) Make public the process and procedures that allows key employees (this includes employees who work in the field) at ODE, who will have contact with urban school districts, to have an articulated knowledge and understanding of the existence of, and the relationship between major initiatives and projects that are targeted specifically at, or will involve urban partnership school districts in a major way.
- 6.) Create a venue for ongoing annual discourse and discussion regarding the current and future status of programs and initiatives that involve ODE and its urban partnership districts.

The ODE Harvard Leadership team, with assistance from an assigned coach, first established a process and a timeline for developing a partnership plan. From the onset, the ODE team determined that its work would be guided by the team's theory of action, the covenant (with emphasis on high-quality teaching and collaboration), and continuous feedback from urban partnership school districts and ODE team members.

One of the major components of the process and the accompanying timeline was to share the plan at various stages with the urban partnership school districts and the entire ODE Harvard Leadership team. The plan was shared on an ongoing basis at various stages to make sure that the plan was truly reflective of stakeholder issues and not solely driven by the ODE's need.

Three different drafts of the plan were shared with the referenced stakeholder entities. Feedback and suggestions were then incorporated into the plan. Time was taken to ensure that the plan reflected communication, collaboration, and cooperation. The development of the process for writing the plan, the writing of the plan, multiple presentations of the plan to urban partnership team members and other stakeholders from the partnership school districts, and the adoption and implementation of the plan occurred from December 2008 until June of 2009.

The presentation of the plan always followed the same format. The presenter from the ODE team would begin (example), "Here is what you said were the issues of concern with regard to collaboration, trust, and program development and sustainment, and here is our intended action. Please review, share with appropriate stakeholders, and determine that if we do... it will address the issue of concern." The ODE team then wrote the final plan and submitted it to the urban school partnership districts for review and approval. The plan was approved in April of 2009. (See ODE Partnership Plan.doc)

The order of the plan is as follows:

The purpose statements of the plan:

- 1.) Develop relationships and interactions between ODE and urban school districts that promote strategies to improve student achievement.
- 2.) Ensure consistency of knowledge, information, and interaction within ODE centers of operation and between these centers and urban partnership districts.
- 3.) Use an array of communication strategies to foster collaboration and ensure accuracy and consistency of information.
- 4.) Annually assess the progress of the communication plan.

There are four comprehensive strategies that articulate the plan's intents and outcomes. Each strategy contains a specific purpose linked to the overall purpose of the plan, a series of tasks to affectively address the strategy and, if appropriate, the number of people and job functions and or roles on the team associated with the strategy.

## **Strategy 1**

### **Create an internal ODE Urban Think Tank**

The team examined the existing internal ODE communication structure. Embedded within this structure was a regular series of monthly meetings between the executive directors of each of the seven centers within the ODE operational structure. At these meetings the executive directors had been discussing issues and initiatives that were currently operating and/or initiatives that might be planned. Although all the executive directors represented centers that had current or planned initiatives with a number of urban districts, a specific agenda item on urban issues had never been placed on the executive director's agenda. The ODE Harvard Leadership team felt that this already existing operational structure would provide an opportunity to address one of the major components of the partnership plan. As the executive directors were second on the leadership framework for each one of the centers and regularly reported to the center's associate superintendent, as well as presented to the entire staff in center meetings, this seemed to be an ideal mechanism to foster improved communication and interaction within and outside of the centers at ODE with regard to programs and initiatives with urban districts. The executive directors readily agreed to place urban issues on their agenda as a standing item for discussion each month and agreed, if necessary, to convene a specific meeting to discuss urban issues. This strategy would address the issue of how to ensure that each center had an awareness of the programs and initiatives that were currently in operation or planned with urban school districts. Discussions would center around opportunities for strategic collaboration among centers in their interactions and relationships with urban districts, expanding the awareness among all the centers as to status of programs and initiatives in operation in urban school districts, establishing the ways and means to avoid duplication of effort, and avoiding the general confusion that would sometimes occur between the urban districts and ODE when two or more centers are operating in the same urban district, but each center has no idea what the other may be doing in the same urban district.

## **Strategy 2**

## **Create an ODE-Urban School District Partnership Committee**

The important issues here were to develop relationships and interactions between ODE and urban school districts that promoted strategies to improve student achievement and to establish a committee that was representative not only of ODE and urban districts, but also represented organizations that had linkages with urban districts. This partnership committee provided an opportunity for agencies and organizations that had specific linkages with urban districts to discuss how to promote issues and initiatives that were of significant importance. It was also important to identify and include agencies who served a broader constituency but whose work involved relevant interaction with urban school districts. For example, an organization that traditionally represents all school administrative leadership interests in the state was included. This was important because this referenced administrative entity has and is currently acting as a lead facilitator for an initiative that had general and specific relevance to urban school districts. The entire committee had the knowledge, expertise and linkages to examine current initiatives and programs that are relevant to the needs of urban districts and provide feedback and analysis as well as resources that might support initiatives designed to promote and sustain high quality teaching and learning in urban districts. The opportunity to discuss emerging and best practice strategies is important because it is expected that these discussions will inform the intent on the part of ODE and urban school districts to jointly apply for grant monies to support high-quality teaching and learning. As part of this strategy the committee has committed to create a twice-a-year document that discusses indicators of success and indicators of concern with regard to the committee's purpose. One of the indicators of success that will be carefully monitored is the committee's ability to maintain a continuous focus on efforts to promote, scale, and sustain high-quality teaching in urban school districts. Although this committee has committed to discuss issues of concern with regard to compliance, the commitment is to not allow these issues to compromise the committee's intents and actions with regard to the support of high-quality teaching.

### **Strategy 3**

#### **Develop strategies to ensure effective communication between ODE and urban partnership districts**

The major purpose of this strategy was to use an array of communication techniques and actions to foster collaboration and ensure accuracy and consistency of information. Important intents of this strategy are as follows:

- 1.) To minimize or eliminate multiple and different responses to urban districts from ODE with regard to partnership and compliance issues.
- 2.) To ensure effective and timely communication between ODE and urban districts regarding the promotion and support of high-quality teaching.
- 3.) Take specific actions that would support effective communication between ODE and the urban districts. Action steps in support of the intents are: a) the establishment of a single point of contact for issues dealing with high-quality teaching and improved student achievement as well as compliance issues; b) conducting periodic contact via conference calls, video conferencing, webinars, etc., to discuss grant opportunities, compliance issues and emerging and best practices; and c) the commitment to conduct a certain number of visits to urban districts each year to meet with the urban

leadership team and other school district and community stakeholders. The intent of these visits is to discuss district initiatives, state department initiatives, and intentionally look for ways that ODE can support district initiatives, while articulating specifically how state initiatives can support district initiatives.

## **Strategy 4**

### **Conduct an assessment and produce an annual report**

Members of the internal/external ODE-urban partnership team, the liaisons from the urban partnership districts, and representatives from the Ohio 8 will meet at least once each year to assess the progress of the communication plan. A survey may be used to assess the effectiveness of the communication plan and make changes as appropriate.

While strategies one through three have more tasks linked to their development and implementation, strategy four is just as important to the success of the plan as the first three. This is the case because prior to the development of this partnership plan, ODE and the urban districts in the state did not have an organized and sustained process for assessing organizational structures, processes, and interactions that would create ongoing collaborative efforts in support of improved student achievement.

Early study and research indicates this plan may be the first of its kind between a state DOE and its urban school districts. There are indications of specific interactions and initiatives between state DOEs and urban districts, but not the development of a comprehensive and multi-faceted partnership plan.

### **Current Progress**

At present, implementation is under way on the first three strategies. The executive directors have made urban issues a standing item on their agenda each month and sometimes more often than once a month. Initially feedback from several urban school districts has been positive regarding interaction and communication.

The urban partnership committee has held its first meeting and has committed to work on specific issues that will support improved student achievement in urban school districts. The committee has committed to maintain a focus on supporting and promoting high-quality teaching as one of the major ways to improve student achievement in urban school districts.

ODE has agreed to take the lead in developing an assessment instrument for review by the urban partnership districts with the intent of using this instrument to gauge how effective the partnership plan has been in meeting its intents.

The team felt that it was important to look for indicators of success and concern early on in the plan's implementation. The team felt that an intentional and honest look at implementation would provide the team and ODE in general with an opportunity to continue actions that support the plan and discontinue actions that may be compromising the plan's successful and ongoing implementation.

To date the ***indicators of success*** are as follows:



- 1.) The meeting between the center's executive directors has resulted in identifying legitimate alignments and intersections between initiatives being implemented in urban districts by two or more centers at ODE. In at least one instance, conversation about these initiatives has resulted in the resolution of a dispute between ODE and an urban district.
- 2.) The ODE/urban partnership committee met and has committed to work on closing the achievement gap as a long term initiative. In addition, members of the committee were able to conduct an on-time discussion on issues associated with the Federal government's Race to the Top initiative.
- 3.) In an effort to address the issue of how the ODE team could realistically visit a large number of urban school districts each year, the ODE/urban partnership committee suggested that the committee, which includes the state superintendent, conducts some regional meetings with urban districts. This plan is under consideration and discussion.

The ***indicators of concern*** at this point are:

- a.) The need for more specific monitoring of the plan by ODE in an effort to insure that ODE is doing what it said it would do regarding implementation and analysis of the plan.
- b.) The need to insure that the original and expanded leadership team continues to meet and analyze the organization's capacity to fully implement and monitor the plan.

References:

Elmore, Richard July 17-19, 2006. Comments during the Harvard Executive Leadership Residential Training for the ODE Partnership at Harvard University at Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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